

Regulatory Institutions Network

From the Perspective of Parents:
Interviews Following a Child Protection
Investigation

Preliminary Findings

Nathan Harris and Linda Gosnell

Occasional Paper 18

March 2012



Australian
National
University



**From the Perspective of Parents: Interviews Following a Child
Protection Investigation**

Preliminary Findings

February 2012

**Prepared by
Nathan Harris and Linda Gosnell
Regulatory Institutions Network
Australian National University
Canberra**

RegNet Occasional Paper No. 18

Published by the Regulatory Institutions Network (RegNet)

The Australian National University
Coombs Building Extension
Fellows Road
Canberra ACT 0200

ISBN 978-0-9870998-1-5

Disclaimer

This article has been written as part of a series of publications issued from the Regulatory Institutions Network. The views contained in this article are representative of the authors only and not of the Australian National University or any funding partner.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This research was funded through an Australian Research Council Linkage Project (LP0669230) held with the ACT Community Services Directorate. The Directorate played an important role by putting the researchers in contact with participants. This would not have happened without support from senior management, or without the dedication of a research team that included Anne Jenkins, Vijaya Goundar, and Leslie Ashe.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	2
TABLE OF CONTENTS.....	3
1. BACKGROUND AND OVERVIEW.....	1
2. PROJECT DESCRIPTION.....	1
2.1 Methodology.....	1
2.2 Participants.....	2
2.3 Description of Sample in Terms of Social-Demographic Variables.....	3
2.4 Description of Sample in Terms of Characteristics of the Cases as Extracted from the Qualitative Data.	5
2.4.1 Abuse and Neglect Categories.....	6
2.4.2 Types of Cases.....	6
2.4.3 Ages of the Children.....	8
2.4.3 Interviewees.....	8
3. HEADLINE RESULTS.....	9
3.1 The Investigation.....	9
3.1.1 Perceptions of what Happens in Investigations.....	9
3.1.2 Procedural Justice.....	10
3.1.3 Reintegration.....	11
3.1.4 Relationship between Parents and Workers.....	12
3.1.5 Parents' Postures towards the Child Protection Agency.....	12
3.1.6 Intentions to Comply with Child Protections Directions.....	13
3.1.7 Initial Reactions to the Investigation.....	13
3.2 The Notification and Alleged Abuse or Neglect.....	14
3.2.1 Knowledge about the Notification.....	14
3.2.2 Feelings about the Notification.....	14
3.2.3 Knowledge about the Investigation and its Outcome.....	14
3.2.4 Acceptance that there is a Problem.....	15
3.2.5 Perceptions of Responsibility.....	16
3.2.6 Contributing Circumstances.....	16
3.3 Knowledge and Reactions of Social Networks.....	18
3.3.1 Others' Knowledge of the Report	18
3.3.2 Others' Perceptions of the Report.....	18
3.3.3 Disapproval of the Parent by Others.....	19
3.4 Outcomes.....	20
3.4.1 Parents' Feelings about the Effects of the Investigation.....	20
3.4.2 Feelings about the Future.....	20
3.4.3 Parenting Self-Efficacy.....	21
3.4.4 Feeling of Empowerment.....	22
4. REFERENCES.....	23

1. BACKGROUND AND OVERVIEW

This report is based on interviews with 156 parents who had been investigated by a statutory child protection agency following notifications that concerned 219 children. The aim was to understand how parents perceived the investigation, how they felt about what had happened, and how they had responded to it. Parents were recruited into the study if they had experienced face-to-face contact with child protection workers because the statutory agency had deemed the risk to their children significant enough to warrant an investigation. Particular emphasis was placed on parents who had experienced this kind of investigation for the first time (as parents), so that the interviews captured the experience with a child protection authority unclouded by past incidents. Questions focused on perceptions of what child protection workers did and how they went about it, what parents thought about the report that instigated the investigation, the response of parents' social networks, feelings about being a parent, and expectations of the future. Items on the emotions of parents that require scaling and analysis in order to facilitate meaningful interpretation are not included in this preliminary report.

This study took place as one component of a Australian Research Council funded Linkage Project titled *Community Capacity Building in Child Protection through Responsive Regulation*. Three universities collaborated on this project: The Australian National University, the University of South Australia, and the Australian Catholic University. The Linkage partner was the ACT Community Services Directorate. The broader focus of this Linkage Project, which was addressed through a number of separate studies, is whether the theory of responsive regulation (Ayres and Braithwaite 1992; J. Braithwaite 2002) could be applied to child protection practice to address systemic problems experienced by agencies in Australia and beyond.

This study contributes to the broader project by providing an insight into the regulatory encounter from the perspective of those who are usually the object of regulation: parents. Responsive regulation assumes that individuals vary in the attitudes (postures) that they hold towards authorities (V. Braithwaite 2003) and that these postures along with their willingness and ability to respond to requests by authorities depends upon their perceptions of how authorities have treated them (Tyler 1990). The ability of child protection systems to build capacity in local communities depends upon the degree to which they are able to engender feelings of hope and empowerment within these communities (V. Braithwaite 2004). This study will use interviews with parents who have recently been subjected to a child protection intervention to understand how variations in these encounters impact upon outcomes.

2. PROJECT DESCRIPTION

2.1 Methodology

Interviews with parents or guardians were sought following investigation. Cases were identified by the ACT governments Community Services Directorate, which has responsibility for child protection. Cases in which the investigation had recently been completed, and which met selection criteria as detailed below, were identified periodically. Staff in the Directorate sent parents a letter from the research team at the Australian National University (ANU) that described the study and asked for permission for the researchers to contact them. Parents were able to contact the ANU researchers directly through a toll free number, but staff in the Directorate would also follow up the letter with a telephone call to parents approximately one week after the letter was sent.

Once in touch with parents the ANU researchers explained the study to them and sought consent to conduct an interview. If this was forthcoming arrangements were made to interview the parent at their home, in the researchers' offices, or at another location that the parent felt comfortable with.

Only one parent in each family was interviewed. In cases where parents had separated it was the parent judged as having primary custody of the children who was contacted. Otherwise, it was left to the couple to decide who would take part in the interview. It should be noted that while the respondents are often referred to as parents in this report, and that the vast majority of cases are parents, a small number of other guardians were included in the sample, including one great grandmother, one aunt, one brother and one sister.

2.2 Participants

The selection of parents for interviewing was based on the aim of talking with parents who had been the subject of a child protection investigation for the first time. Given the considerable range of cases that come to the attention of child protection agencies a second criteria was to only interview parents where the concerns were sufficient to warrant an investigation that involved face-to-face contact with the parents. It was important that parents were aware that they had been investigated and that they had some direct contact with child protection authorities.

An additional factor that affected sample selection was the introduction of a 'differential response' model at the same time that this study was starting. Differential response meant that the child protection agency could conduct an Assessment and Support intervention as an alternative to an Appraisal, the term used in the ACT for a full child protection investigation. Assessment and Support interventions which are used in cases where risk is assessed as lower, are not oriented towards collecting evidence in order to substantiate concerns, and are voluntary. While the decision is made at the outset of a case to instigate an Assessment and Support response through an Initial Safety Visit, it is also possible for cases to be reclassified as requiring a full investigation. It was also apparent that Assessment and Support cases could remain open for extended periods and lead to further work with the families involved. It was decided to include Assessment and Support cases, but only where the outcome of the assessment was "Further Involvement Recommended".

The criteria for selection can be summarised as:

1. Parent/s were deemed eligible if they had experienced either a full investigation, or an 'Assessment and Support' intervention that resulted in some form of follow-up.
2. Parent/s were excluded if the agencies' records indicated that a full investigation involving the parents had previously been completed, or if a previous Assessment and Support intervention had resulted in follow-up.

Only parents who were over 18 were interviewed. There was also agreement that there were a number of specific conditions in which the Department could exclude cases. These were if the allegation concerned an unborn child, if there had been a death, or if a 'Special Appraisal' was conducted because the allegations concerned a high profile figure, a member of the Armed Services, or an employee of the Department.

2.3 Description of Sample in Terms of Social-Demographic Variables

Demographic data reveals a diverse range of backgrounds (see Table 1).

- ⤴ A majority of the respondents who were interviewed were female (87%).
- ⤴ The median age of respondents was 36, with the youngest being 18 and the oldest 66.
- ⤴ Forty-one percent of the parents were married or living in de facto relationships but another 28 percent had never been married and 29 percent were now divorced or separated.
- ⤴ Eight percent of the parents identified themselves as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander. Once their partners' background were taken into account it is likely that a higher percentage of the children would have Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander heritage.
- ⤴ Educational backgrounds across the group were diverse with a year 10 certificate being the highest qualification for 27 percent of participants, while 19 percent of participants had completed tertiary education.
- ⤴ Forty-seven percent were in full or part-time work, while another 38 percent were at home. Only 6 percent described themselves as unemployed. Household incomes are spread across the income ranges between \$5000 (3 %) to those on more than \$200,000 (4%).

Table 1: Summary Description of Responses to Survey Questions

	Frequency	Percent
Gender		
Male	21	14%
Female	135	87%
Age¹		
18 - 19 years	9	6%
21 - 24 years	18	12%
25 - 29 years	18	12%
30 - 34 years	19	13%
35 - 39 years	32	22%
40 - 44 years	32	22%
45 - 49 years	12	8%
50 - 54 years	7	5%
55 - 59 years	0	0%
60 + years	2	1%
Marital status		
Now married (Inc. de facto)	64	41%
Never married	43	28%
Widowed	3	2%
Divorced or separated	45	29%

	Frequency	Percent
Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander heritage?		
Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander	12	8%
Not Aboriginal	144	92%
Number of children		
0	1	1%
1	46	29%
2	44	28%
3	41	26%
4	17	11%
5	3	2%
6	3	2%
7	1	1%
Highest qualification attained		
No formal schooling	0	0%
Primary school	6	4%
Junior Secondary/ Intermediate/ Form 4/ Year 10	42	27%
Senior Secondary/ Leaving/ Form 6/ Year 12	19	12%
Certificate (Level I, II, III or IV)	28	18%
Trade Certificate or Nursing Diploma	9	6%
Diploma or Advanced Diploma	21	13%
Bachelor Degree	19	12%
Graduate certificate or Graduate Diploma	5	3%
Post-Graduate Degree (Masters or PhD)	6	4%
Not applicable / Still at school	1	1%
Work situation during the last 6 months?		
Working full-time for pay	50	32%
Working part-time for pay	24	15%
Unemployed and looking for work	6	4%
Unemployed and not looking for work	3	2%
Retired from paid work	0	0%
A full-time school or university student	3	2%
Home duties	60	38%
Other	10	6%
Approximate household income²		
None - \$5,000	5	3%
\$10,000 - \$15,000	23	15%
\$20,000 - \$25,000	12	8%
\$30,000 - \$35,000	14	9%
\$40,000 - \$45,000	10	6%
\$50,000 - \$60,000	20	13%
\$70,000 - \$80,000	8	5%
\$90,000 - \$100,000	19	12%
\$150,000 - \$200,000	11	7%
More than \$200,000	6	4%
Don't Know	27	17%

1. In seven cases participants did not provide their age. 2. In one case a participant did not respond to the income question.

While it is clear that participants come from a range of social-economic backgrounds and that some households have high incomes, a closer look at the estimated income data also suggests high levels of relative poverty. This can be illustrated by estimating the number of parents who are below the poverty line. It is important to note that this is only an estimate because poverty lines are based on a number of assumptions and have their own limitations (Saunders 1995). An estimate of the relative poverty line for each family was based on the September Quarter of 2010 update of the Henderson Poverty Line published by the Melbourne Institute of Applied Economic and Social Research (2010), which takes into account whether the household consists of a single parent or a couple and how many children are in that household. Of the 127 participants who provided an estimate of their household income 42, or 33% of those who provided an income estimate, were below the relative poverty line. Table 2 shows that the households most likely to be living below this relative poverty line are those that are headed by a single adult with more than one child.

Table 2: Number of Household Below the Henderson Poverty Line by Marital Status and Number of Children*

		Couple or Single Parent household			
		Couple (n = 53)		Single (n=74)	
		Below Relative Poverty Line	Above Relative Poverty Line	Below Relative Poverty Line	Above Relative Poverty Line
N u m b e r o f C h i l d r e n	1	1	12	7	18
	2	2	8	14	13
	3	3	14	9	8
	4	2	7	2	1
	5	0	2	1	0
	6	0	1	1	0
	7	0	1	0	0
Total		8	45	34	40

* These numbers are estimates based on the updated Henderson Poverty Line for the September Quarter of 2010 (Melbourne Institute of Applied Economic and Social Research 2010). These estimates excluded housing costs but assume the head of the household is in the workforce. Estimates for families with more than 4 children were calculated, with assistance from the Melbourne Institute of Applied Economic and Social Research, using the implicit equivalence scale.

2.4 Description of Sample in Terms of Characteristics of the Cases as Extracted from the Qualitative Data.

Interviews with participants included both quantitative and qualitative questions. Within the qualitative component of the interviews most participants talked about the circumstances surrounding the report that were not asked about in the quantitative items. For this report the qualitative data have been coded to provide insight into the nature of the cases that were included in the sample.

2.4.1 Abuse and Neglect Categories

From participants perceptions of the concerns expressed by child protection workers each case was categorised by the researchers according to the standard abuse and neglect categories: physical abuse, sexual abuse, emotional abuse and neglect. Table 3 shows that the largest number of investigations in the sample concerned allegations of neglect, followed in decreasing order by physical abuse, sexual abuse and emotional abuse. If these proportions are compared to the numbers of substantiated concerns reported for the ACT in 2009-10 (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2011¹) it suggests that this sample includes an over representation of cases involving physical (25% compared to 14%) and sexual (12.8% compared to 6.5%) abuse and a much lower percentage of emotional abuse (9.6% compared to 45%) compared to the population of cases in which abuse or neglect is substantiated. The percentage cases categorised as neglect in this study was 45.5 (compared to 34.4%).

It is important to note that the figures from Australian Institute of Health and Welfare are not directly comparable to the numbers in this study, which includes cases that weren't substantiated but also excluded those cases where it was known that the family had already been investigated (see section 2.2).

In 10 of the cases it was not possible to classify the case because the parent did not divulge the alleged abuse of the investigation.

Table 3: Abuse and Neglect Categories

Abuse Types	Frequency	Percentage
Physical	39	25.0%
Sexual	20	12.8%
Emotional	15	9.6%
Neglect	71	45.5%
Unknown	10	6.4%

2.4.2 Types of Cases

Beyond the categories of abuse and neglect, it becomes clear that the characteristics of cases also differed depending upon the underlying reason for the investigation. In the majority of cases the investigation was instigated by an allegation of abuse by the parent who had primary custody of the child, and in another eight percent of cases the alleged abuse was by someone else, sometimes the child's other parent. However, in almost 20 percent of cases the underlying concerns seemed to be the behaviour of the child. Often these cases involved teenagers. Finally, there were smaller groupings where the initial reason for investigation appeared to be that a parent was struggling to cope and needed assistance, where assistance was sought by a parent, or where child protection had some other reason to monitor the situation.

Table 4: Types of Cases

	Frequency	Percentage
Alleged Abuse by parent or partner	102	65.4%
Alleged Abuse by other party	13	8.3%
Behaviour of child	30	19.2%
Non-Coping Parent	5	3.2%

¹ Table 2.7 on page 26.

FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF PARENTS: INTERVIEWS FOLLOWING A CHILD PROTECTION INVESTIGATION

Assistance sought by parent	4	2.6%
Monitoring of situation	2	1.3%

2.4.3 *Ages of the Children*

Based on the qualitative data it was possible to identify the ages of children in the cases investigated. The figure derived from this method may not match official data because a judgement was required about which children in each household were the subjects of an investigation. In some cases, particularly of physical or sexual assault, allegations would only concern one of the children in the family. Table 5 shows the number of families in which children of each age group were investigated. Twenty-six of the investigations concerned allegations of abuse or neglect in which babies were concerned, 89 in which children were concerned and 64 in which teenagers were concerned.

Table 5: Prevalence of Age Groups that were Investigated

	Frequency
Number of investigations that concerned babies (< 1 yr old)	26
Number of investigations that concerned children (2-12)	89
Number of investigations that concerned teenagers (13-17)	64

2.4.3 *Interviewees*

Interviews were conducted following a letter sent to parents by the statutory agency. In those cases where both parents lived together interviews were conducted with whichever parent was available. In some cases both parents were present and contributed to the discussion but only one parent in each case completed the quantitative questions. In cases where parents lived separately the letter was sent to the parent who was deemed by the statutory agency as having primary guardianship. The vast majority of interviewees were mothers, with approximately 11 percent of the interviews with fathers, and in a small number of cases interviews were conducted with other relatives who the children were living with.

Table 6: Who was interviewed

Interviewees	Frequency	Percentage
Mother	135	86.5%
Father	17	10.9%
Great grandmother	1	0.6%
Aunt	1	0.6%
Brother	1	0.6%
Sister	1	0.6%

3. HEADLINE RESULTS

3.1 The Investigation

3.1.1 *Perceptions of what Happens in Investigations*

Participants were read statements that represented various things that might have occurred in the initial meeting with child protection workers. Participants were asked to indicate to what degree they felt that they occurred by choosing one of five response categories on a scale that went from 'Not at all' to 'Very Much'.

The questions in this section might be summarised as exploring a number of themes. One is the degree to which child protection workers involved parents in identifying any problems they were encountering as well as solutions to these problems. There were a range of responses on these items, but the frequencies show that a majority of parents felt that this didn't happen at all or at most only moderately.

A second group of questions show that in these early meetings few parents had access to services organised for them, that even fewer felt pressured to access a service (though a significant minority clearly did), and that in most cases workers did not check if they had accessed services.

Parents were split in terms of how investigative they found the process. This was evident in the spread of responses to questions asking about what the degree child protection workers had investigated their children's lives, whether they carefully recorded what was said, and whether workers were focused on finding out whether the allegations were true or not. The majority of parents reported that workers didn't challenge the way they looked after their children or become confrontational (though again, a significant minority felt that they had). It was apparent that parents were fairly even in the degree to which they felt that the process was focused on providing help or being focused on investigation.

Table 7: What Does Child Protection do From the Perspective of Parents

	Not at all	2	3	4	Very much
To what degree did the child protection worker(s) involve you in deciding what would be the best approach they could take?	29%	21%	15%	21%	13%
To what degree did the child protection worker(s) ask you about what things worked well in your family?	40%	22%	17%	13%	8%
To what degree did the child protection worker(s) ask you about people, such as friends, family, the family doctors, or other people, who might support you?	26%	17%	23%	17%	17%
To what degree did the child protection worker(s) support you by talking with you about any problems you were experiencing?	17%	30%	16%	21%	16%
To what degree did the child protection worker(s) seek your opinion on what they could do to help you?	28%	17%	29%	13%	14%

	Not at all	2	3	4	Very much
To what degree did the child protection worker(s) organise for you to access services or programs that would be helpful to you?	42%	26%	12%	13%	8%
To what degree did the child protection worker(s) put pressure on you to access a service or assessment that you didn't want to attend?	72%	6%	5%	8%	9%
To what degree did the child protection worker(s) follow up and check that you had accessed services?	66%	13%	7%	8%	6%
To what degree did the child protection worker(s) try to find out whether the report that had been made was true?	30%	16%	19%	18%	17%
To what degree did the child protection worker(s) investigate your child's/children's lives - for example, by asking lots of questions, wanting to see the children, see where you lived?	12%	20%	24%	21%	24%
To what degree did the child protection worker(s) carefully record what was said?	21%	14%	22%	24%	18%
To what degree did the child protection worker(s) challenge you about how you were looking after your child/children?	51%	13%	11%	14%	11%
To what degree did the child protection worker(s) become confrontational?	65%	10%	8%	8%	10%
Do you think that child protection services were focused on helping?	15%	12%	31%	17%	26%
Do you think that child protection services were focused on investigating?	16%	14%	20%	23%	27%

3.1.2 Procedural Justice

The majority of participants felt that child protection workers were respectful; that they clearly explained what they were doing, what the concerns were and what they wanted parents to do; gave parents a chance to explain things from their perspective and weren't biased. However, it is also apparent that on each of these issues between 19 and 32 percent of parents didn't agree with the majority (choosing responses on the negative side of the scales).

The areas in which child protection was perceived by more parents as less fair was in the degree to which parents had control over the way the issues were handled and whether they would be able to have a mistake corrected if one was made by child protection workers.

Parents were fairly evenly split in the degree to which they felt that child protection workers had done what they said they would do, with 44% on the side of the scale indicating they thought that workers had and 43% on the side of the scale indicating that they hadn't.

Table 8: Perceptions of Procedural Justice

	Not at all	2	3	4	Very much
Did you feel that the child protection workers were respectful towards you?	13%	6%	18%	24%	39%
Did you feel that the child protection worker explained what they were doing clearly to you?	12%	17%	21%	18%	32%

	Not at all	2	3	4	Very much
Did you understand what child protection services were worried about?	14%	6%	17%	20%	43%
Did you understand what child protection services wanted you to do?	18%	14%	19%	19%	30%
Did you feel that you had a chance to explain things from your perspective?	17%	12%	16%	21%	35%
Did you feel that you had some control over the way that the issue was handled?	41%	17%	13%	12%	16%
Did you feel that they were biased in the way they dealt with you?	50%	14%	12%	9%	15%
If child protection got something wrong did you feel that you would be able to get it corrected?	30%	15%	20%	16%	18%
Did the child protection worker(s) do what they said they would do?	21%	22%	14%	16%	28%

3.1.3 Reintegration

On most of the items measuring reintegration it was clear that a majority of participants felt that they were respected, that workers were accepting of them as a parent, did not make them feel as though they were someone who wouldn't look after their children properly, that they were critical or judgmental of them or that they didn't love their children. The area in which parent felt least reintegrated was on whether they might be judged forever and whether they would be allowed to put the allegations behind them.

As in previous sections there is a significant minority who have the opposite view to the majority of respondents. Between 23 and 46 percent of parents' responses across these items were on the side of the scale that indicated that they felt stigmatised by the process.

Table 9: Perceptions of Reintegration

	Not at all	2	3	4	Very much
Did you feel that the child protection worker(s) had respect for you as a parent?	16%	11%	22%	22%	29%
Did you feel that the child protection workers thought of you as someone who wasn't going to look after your children properly?	51%	16%	10%	9%	14%
Did you feel that you were going to be judged forever because of the report?	29%	16%	9%	13%	33%
Did you feel that the child protection worker(s) was accepting of you as a parent?	15%	10%	22%	25%	28%
Did you feel that you would be allowed to put the allegations behind you once they had made sure your child/children was safe?	28%	15%	15%	20%	23%
Did you sense that the child protection worker(s) was critical or judgmental of you?	51%	13%	9%	10%	17%
Did you feel that you were treated as though you didn't love your child/children?	60%	9%	8%	7%	15%

3.1.4 Relationship between Parents and Workers

Parents were asked how many different child protection workers had been their “primary” worker. Sixty-three percent of parents reported having just one primary worker, while the remaining 37 percent had two or more.

Parents were then asked to identify the first of these workers who had played a substantial role in their case, and were asked about their relationship with that worker. A majority of parents felt that the child protection worker had been professional and nearly as many felt that the worker had treated their child appropriately. While less parents reported that they personally liked their worker, it remained the case that a majority did.

Table 10: Parents' Perceptions of their Child Protection Worker

	Not at all	2	3	4	Very much
Did you feel that this worker(s) was professional?	7%	5%	14%	23%	51%
Did you personally like this worker?	16%	10%	18%	27%	29%
Did you feel that this worker treated your child/children appropriately?	6%	10%	16%	23%	45%

3.1.5 Parents' Postures towards the Child Protection Agency

Parents' relationship with the child protection agency was measured through a number of questions that explored postures towards the agency. A very clear split between respondents is apparent on items that measure attitudes that child protection does a worthwhile job, that parents need to go along with whatever child protection services want, and feeling that child protection has the wrong approach. On each of these items a significant percentage of participants chose not at all while a similar proportion chose very much.

In contrast, only a minority of parents were inclined to dismiss what child protection thought and only two percent of parents said that they would try to manipulate child protection into doing what they wanted them to do.

Table 11: Parents' Postures towards the Child Protection Agency

	Not at all	2	3	4	Very much
Do you feel positive towards child protection services because you think they do a worthwhile job?	23%	8%	31%	14%	25%
Do you feel that you need to go along with whatever child protection services want?	31%	12%	17%	15%	25%
Do you feel that child protection services have the wrong approach?	25%	21%	21%	9%	23%
Are you inclined to say that you do not care what child protection services think?	64%	13%	11%	3%	9%
Do you try to manipulate child protection into doing what you want them to do?	91%	6%	1%	0%	2%

3.1.6 Intentions to Comply with Child Protections Directions

While parents expressed a number of different postures towards intervention by the child protection agency, the vast majority of parents indicated to researchers that they intended to do what child protection workers asked of them. Only three percent, or 5 out of 156 parents, suggested that they wouldn't comply at all. Fifty-seven percent of parents indicated that they would comply very much and the top three categories comprise 96 percent of all participants. This suggests that very few parents don't intend to do what child protection requests of them.

Table 12: Intentions to Comply

	Not at all	2	3	4	Very much
Ultimately, will you do what child protection have asked you to do?	3%	1%	16%	23%	57%

3.1.7 Initial Reactions to the Investigation

The initial response of many parents to investigation was to feel intimidated by the process, to feel powerless and to be fearful of what child protection might do. However, these feelings were not universal, with 21-22% of parents reporting that they didn't experience these feelings at all. Relatively low levels of feelings of trust accompanied this initial encounter for many parents, but the vast majority said that they sought to cooperate with the child protection as much as they could.

Table 13: Initial Reactions to the Investigation

	Not at all	2	3	4	Very much
Did you feel intimidated by the process?	22%	19%	12%	13%	33%
Did you feel powerless?	21%	17%	10%	13%	40%
Were you fearful of what child protection might do?	22%	10%	8%	10%	50%
When child protection first came to see you, did you feel that you could place your trust in them?	39%	17%	17%	14%	13%
When child protection first came to see you, did you cooperate with them as much as you could?	2%	3%	5%	13%	77%

3.2 The Notification and Alleged Abuse or Neglect

3.2.1 Knowledge about the Notification

As might have been expected the majority of notifications were made by someone other than the parent. Nevertheless it is significant that in 14 percent of cases it is the parent or someone on their behalf that makes the notification in order to seek assistance.

Despite the fact most reports were made by someone else, and that there are strong confidentiality provisions around reporting, 83 percent of parents said that they knew who made the report.

Table 14: The Notification

	No	Yes
Did you make the report to child protection yourself, or did someone make it on your behalf?	86%	14%
Do you know who made the report?	17%	83%

3.2.2 Feelings about the Notification

Parents' reactions show a significant division in how positive participants felt about the notification. A large proportion of the respondents clustered at either end of the scale. This is particularly evident in parents' responses to whether it was right for the report to have been made and whether parents would accept support from the reporter.

Table 15: Feelings about the Notification

	Not at all	2	3	4	Very much
Do you think that reporting their concerns to the child protection services was the right thing for them to do?	29%	4%	15%	11%	40%
Do you feel angry towards the person who made the report?	55%	19%	5%	4%	16%
If it was offered, would you accept support from the person who made the report?	29%	2%	12%	11%	46%

3.2.3 Knowledge about the Investigation and its Outcome

Use of a 'differential response' model by the statutory agency, in which child protection workers can use one of two procedures to investigate a case based on an initial assessments of risk, means that participants could have received either an Appraisal (a formal investigation) or Assessment and Support. However, when participants were asked whether they had received a formal Appraisal 66 percent did not know. While a lack of familiarity with these term may have affected the response of participants, it was clear in our interviews that many participants were not clear about the procedures.

Table 16: Knowledge about the Investigation

	No	Yes	Don't know
Did they conduct a formal appraisal?	13%	21%	66%

When parents were asked if child protection had informed them whether it had been decided that their child was at risk of harm 13 percent said that child protection had informed them that their child was at risk, while 46 percent said that child protection had decided there was no risk of harm. Forty-one percent said that they hadn't been told anything. This may have been because these parents had received Assessment and Support rather than a full investigation, but this was not clear to participants.

Table 17: Knowledge about the Decision

Have child protection informed you whether they decided that:	Frequency	Percentage
a) your child/children was/were at risk of harm.....	18	13%
b) your child/children was/were not at risk of harm.....	62	46%
c) didn't tell you anything.....	56	41%

3.2.4 Acceptance that there is a Problem

The 18 parents who indicated that they had been informed that their child was at risk were asked if they accepted this judgement. The majority agreed with child protection agency's assessment, with only two parents indicating 'not at all'.

It was important to understand whether parents in the study accepted that there was some basis for concern about their children. All parents in the sample were asked whether there had been some instances where the situation was not ideal for their children. The response to this question illustrates the strong differences in the views of parents. Thirty percent of the parents agreed 'very much', while another 40 percent agreed to some extent. However, it was also clear that 30 percent of the sample didn't think there had been any situations in which there was cause for concern.

Table 18: Acceptance of the Decision or the Existence of a Problem

	Not at all	2	3	4	Very much
Do you accept child protections opinion that there was a problem? ¹	11%	6%	17%	6%	61%
Forgetting about what child protection decided, do you think there have been some instances where the situation was not ideal for your children?	30%	12%	15%	13%	30%

1. 18 parents responded to this question because only 18 had been informed that their child was at risk.

The questions in Sections 3.2.5 and 3.2.6 were answered by the 127 participants who accepted, at least to some degree, the child protections agency's assessment that their children were at risk or believed that there had been some instances where the situation was not ideal for their children.

3.2.5 Perceptions of Responsibility

A majority of parents felt that the incident or situation that child protection had investigated could have had a negative impact on their children, and rejected the suggestion that the situation was excusable. While accepting the seriousness of the situation most parents felt that it occurred due to factors that were beyond their control, that they weren't responsible for the situation, that the incident or situation had been a mistake rather than intentional, and that the situation was not typical of their parenting. On each of these scales there was a range of responses, but much greater differences in parents' perceptions occurred on questions of whether others were responsible, whether the child protection agency was a bigger problem than the situation itself, and whether the situation had been a mistake or intentional.

Table 19: Perceptions of Responsibility for the Incident/Situation*

	Not at all	2	3	4	Very much
The incident/situation could have had a negative impact on my child?	9%	7%	12%	26%	46%
The incident/situation was excusable because of circumstances at the time?	42%	13%	17%	12%	16%
The incident/situation occurred because of factors that were beyond my control?	6%	8%	11%	22%	52%
I feel that I was responsible for the incident/situation occurring?	40%	11%	17%	15%	17%
I feel that someone else was responsible for the incident/situation occurring?	33%	6%	13%	18%	31%
The incident/situation was a mistake, rather than intentional?	25%	7%	15%	15%	39%
The incident/situation isn't typical of the way I parent?	11%	5%	5%	10%	69%
Child protection were a bigger problem than the incident/situation that they were concerned about?	41%	9%	12%	10%	29%

* Answered by 127 respondents.

3.2.6 Contributing Circumstances

When asked about circumstances that had contributed to the situation or incident that hadn't been ideal for their children, parents identified 'stress or other mental health problems' in more than half of the cases. Relationship problems or domestic violence were next highest, with 40% of participants selecting the top 2 categories, but many parents also reported health problems (28%), financial difficulties (22%), and housing (20%). Drug or alcohol problems were the least highly selected (17%).

When the contributing circumstances that were of greatest significance for each respondent were combined, nearly sixty percent of the parents indicated that either financial problems, health problems, mental health issues, relationship problems, alcohol or drugs problems, or housing had contributed 'very much' to the problems their children had encountered. Only nine percent of parents didn't think that any of these factors had contributed towards the situation or incident.

Table 20: Circumstances that contributed towards the Incident/Situation*

	Not at all	2	3	4	Very much
Did financial problems contribute to the situation or incident that was not ideal for your children?	61%	6%	12%	5%	17%
Did health problems contribute to the situation or incident that was not ideal for your children?	64%	5%	3%	8%	20%
Did stress or other mental health problems contribute to the situation or incident that was not ideal for your children?	20%	5%	14%	24%	38%
Did relationship problems or domestic violence contribute to the situation or incident that was not ideal for your children?	45%	7%	8%	13%	27%
Did dependency on alcohol or drugs contribute to the situation or incident that was not ideal for your children?	72%	6%	6%	4%	13%
Did housing contribute to the situation or incident that was not ideal for your children?	69%	6%	6%	2%	18%
Greatest contributing circumstance for each participant	9%	6%	10%	16%	59%

* Answered by 127 respondents.

3.3 Knowledge and Reactions of Social Networks

3.3.1 Others' Knowledge of the Report

Ninety-five percent of participants reported that others knew about the child protection notification. When parents were asked to identify the groups of people who knew, it was evident that in a majority of cases knowledge of the report was wide spread in parents' social circles. Immediate family knew most often, followed by friends, then schools or child care services. Health professionals were often also aware, as were extended family. Neighbours and acquaintances were the least likely to know, though just over one quarter knew about the report.

Table 21: Did Others Know about the Report

	No	Yes
Do any other people, such as your family, friends, mothers groups, school teachers, etc, know about the child protection report?	5%	95%
<i>If so,</i>		
Did immediate family (parents, siblings) know about the report?	7%	93%
Did extended family know about the report?	44%	56%
Did friends know about the report?	20%	80%
Did school/day care/other child services know about the report?	25%	75%
Did neighbours or acquaintances know about the report?	73%	27%
Did health professionals know about the report?	37%	63%

3.3.2 Others' Perceptions of the Report

When asked about others' reactions to the report parents' answers mirrored the divergent responses they gave when asked about their own reactions. In every category, responses tended to cluster at either end of the scale. A significant proportion of parents felt that others didn't think there was a problem at all, while another significant proportion of parents reported that others did think there was a problem. There were not large differences in the pattern of responses across the different social groups. However, immediate family were perceived as most likely to think that there was a problem that needed to be addressed, while extended family were perceived as the least likely to think there was a problem.

Table 22: Did Others Perceive that there was a Problem

	Not at all	2	3	4	Very much
Did immediate family (parents, siblings) think there was a problem that needed to be addressed?	43%	5%	13%	9%	29%
Did extended family think there was a problem that needed to be addressed?	54%	4%	10%	12%	20%
Did friends think there was a problem that needed to be addressed?	46%	8%	8%	12%	25%

	Not at all	2	3	4	Very much
	Not at all	2	3	4	Very much
Did school/day care/other child services think there was a problem that needed to be addressed?	31%	12%	18%	15%	24%
Did neighbours or acquaintances think there was a problem that needed to be addressed?	50%	8%	8%	8%	25%
Did health professionals think there was a problem that needed to be addressed?	38%	6%	18%	11%	27%

3.3.3 Disapproval of the Parent by Others

Parents were asked whether each of the groups would be disapproving of them because of the concerns. Overall, the perception of disapproval was extremely low. Immediate family were amongst the most disapproving, but even then only four percent of parents thought their immediate family was very disapproving, and 87 percent responded that their immediate family weren't disapproving at all. Of all the groups, schools or other childcare facilities were perceived as the most disapproving. Twenty-three percent of parents perceived that schools had been disapproving of them to some degree.

Compared to the low levels of disapproval amongst immediate social networks, parents felt that there would be much greater disapproval by society in general. Thirty-nine percent of parents responded with 'very much' or the category just below that, and only 33 percent thought that society would not be disapproving at all.

Table 23: Were Others Disapproving

	Not at all	2	3	4	Very much
Were immediate family (parents, siblings) disapproving of you because of the child protection concerns?	87%	6%	1%	2%	4%
Were extended family disapproving of you because of the child protection concerns?	84%	5%	6%	2%	2%
Were friends disapproving of you because of the child protection concerns?	89%	9%	2%	1%	0%
Were school/day care/other child services disapproving of you because of the child protection concerns?	76%	13%	2%	3%	5%
Were neighbours or acquaintances disapproving of you because of the child protection concerns?	89%	0%	3%	8%	0%
Were health professionals disapproving of you because of the child protection concerns?	89%	6%	5%	0%	1%
Do you think that society in general would be disapproving?	33%	9%	19%	17%	22%

3.4 Outcomes

3.4.1 Parents' Feelings about the Effects of the Investigation

The majority of parents were sceptical about the benefits of investigation, though a significant minority felt that it had a positive impact. More than fifty percent said that intervention hadn't helped them or their child at all. The remaining parents felt that intervention had helped them to varying degrees with only 12 percent feeling that it had helped their children very much. Fewer parents felt that the intervention had a positive impact on their relationship with their child(ren), with 65 percent saying it had no positive affect at all. Forty-four percent of parents felt that the experience had made them less trusting of child protection, 29 percent reported that it had made them more trusting, while 28 percent selected the mid point of the scale, suggesting that the amount of trust hadn't changed.

Table 24: Response to the Process

	Not at all	2	3	4	Very much
Do you think that child protection services have helped your child/children?	54%	11%	12%	11%	12%
Do you think that child protection services have helped you?	51%	12%	13%	10%	13%
Has action by child protection services improved your relationship with your child / children?	65%	10%	10%	9%	5%
Ultimately, will you do what child protection have asked you to do?	3%	1%	16%	23%	57%

	Less trust	2	3	4	More trust
As a result of your experience do you have less trust or more trust in child protection services?	30%	14%	28%	11%	18%

3.4.2 Feelings about the Future

Parents were generally optimistic about the future, with 75-80 percent feeling positive about the future in general and about their children's future in particular (top 2 response categories). Though it is significant that 9 percent of parents felt quite negative about their children's future (bottom 2 categories) and another 12 percent were unsure.

A similar proportion of parents felt that they had people who they could call on for help, but it is also clear that a significant number felt that they did not have all the support that they needed. Parents were also more hesitant about the degree to which they felt in control of their lives and significant numbers didn't feel that the concerns that had been identified by the child protection agency had been solved. One thing that the vast majority of parents did feel sure of was that they had a good relationship with their children.

Table 25: Feelings about the Future

	Not at all	2	3	4	Very much
Do you feel positive about the future?	4%	4%	15%	25%	52%
Do you feel positive about your child's future?	5%	4%	12%	27%	53%
If things did get difficult, are there people who you can call on for help?	3%	6%	13%	19%	58%
Do you feel that you now have all the support that you need?	18%	8%	19%	21%	33%
Do you feel in control of your life?	9%	9%	21%	33%	29%
Do you feel that the concerns identified by child protection services have now been solved?	24%	9%	11%	14%	42%
Do you have a good relationship with your child/children?	1%	2%	6%	18%	73%

3.4.3 Parenting Self-Efficacy

Parents were asked to answer a number of questions about their confidence in parenting their children. High proportions of parents were confident that their children knew that they loved them and that they were able to provide a safe environment for their children. Greater variability is observed on questions concerning discipline, their child's learning, overcoming problems, and parents' acceptance of themselves as a good parent who is able to handle the pressures and expectations of parenthood.

Table 26: Parenting Self-Efficacy

	Not at all	2	3	4	Very much
I find it easy to comfort my child/children?	2%	3%	13%	26%	55%
My child/children knows that I love them?	0%	1%	3%	8%	88%
I think I can (will be able to) solve any problems that might come up involving discipline with my child/children?	7%	4%	24%	27%	38%
I think I am (will be) able to guide my child/children so that they behave appropriately	4%	2%	19%	32%	43%
I feel that I know enough about my child's/children's needs to help them as they learn and grow	2%	4%	6%	31%	57%
I'm good at finding interesting and stimulating things for my child/children to do?	3%	8%	21%	29%	40%
I am confident that I can provide a safe environment for my child/children to grow up in?	2%	3%	2%	20%	74%

	Not at all	2	3	4	Very much
I know that I would be able to react quickly to protect my child/children if they were in danger	0%	1%	1%	9%	90%
If my child/children is being difficult I can usually find a way of solving the situation?	3%	3%	17%	36%	41%
Even if my child/children is having a difficult day I can usually find a way of getting through without it getting on top of me?	3%	5%	21%	33%	38%
I manage the pressures of parenting as well as other parent's do?	1%	5%	22%	26%	46%
I know that I am a good parent?	1%	3%	6%	31%	60%
I find it difficult to cope with others expectations of me as a parent?	34%	25%	13%	13%	15%

3.4.4 Feeling of Empowerment

Parents in the research generally expressed a strong need for control over the way in which their child was looked after, but significant numbers of parents felt that they were unable to look after their child as they wanted to due to their own circumstances as well as the nature of society. In general, parents in the project did not feel that government policies empowered them to look after their children in the way that they would like.

Table 27: Parent's Feelings of Empowerment

	Not at all	2	3	4	Very much
I feel that I need to be in control of how my child/children is/are being looked after	4%	4%	12%	26%	54%
Because of my own circumstances, I don't feel able to parent my child/children as I would like to?	52%	14%	12%	7%	15%
The way that society is means that it is difficult to look after my child/children as I would like to?	34%	15%	19%	14%	18%
Regardless of what I want, there are other factors which determine what happens in my children's lives?	6%	10%	20%	26%	38%
Governments and other organisations have policies which make it easier for me to look after my children in the way that I would like to?	28%	15%	28%	18%	10%

4. REFERENCES

- Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. 2011. *Child protection Australia 2009-10*. Child welfare series. Canberra: Australian Institute of Health and Welfare.
- Ayres, Ian, and John Braithwaite. 1992. *Responsive regulation: Transcending the deregulation debate*. Oxford socio-legal studies. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Braithwaite, John. 2002. *Restorative Justice & Responsive Regulation*. Studies in crime and public policy. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Braithwaite, Valerie. 2003. *Taxing democracy: Understanding tax avoidance and evasion*. Ashgate Publishing, Ltd.
- . 2004. “The Hope Process and Social Inclusion.” *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 592 (1) (March 1): 128 -151. doi:10.1177/0002716203262096.
- Melbourne Institute of Applied Economic and Social Research. 2010. *Poverty lines: Australia*. Melbourne: Melbourne Institute of Applied Economic and Social Research, September.
- Saunders, Peter. 1995. *A Challenge to Work and Welfare: Poverty in Australia in the 1990s*. SPRC Discussion paper. Sydney: Social policy Research Centre.
- Tyler, Tom R. 1990. *Why people obey the law*. New Haven, CT, USA: Yale University Press.

